ED 423 211 EDUCATION FOR ENGAGEMENT IN CIVIL SOCIETY AND GOVERNMENT. ERIC DIGEST.
1 OF 1 ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE FOR SOCIAL STUDIES/SOCIAL SCIENCE EDUCATION, B...
PATRICK, JOHN J. 98 4P.

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 423 211 SO 029 640

AUTHOR Patrick, John J.
TITLE Education for Engagement in Civil Society and Government. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-SO-98-8
PUB DATE 1998-09-00
NOTE 4p.
CONTRACT RR93002014
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, 2805 East Tenth Street, Suite 120, Bloomington, IN, 47408.
PUB TYPE ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Citizenship Education; *Civics; *Democracy; Elementary Secondary Education; Law Related Education; Service Learning; Social Studies
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

A report by the National Commission on Civic Renewal has sounded alarms about the declining quantity and quality of citizen engagement in U.S. political and civic life. According to the Commission the overall civic condition is weaker than it was and in need of significant improvement. To renew the constructive engagement of citizens in political and civic life intellectual capital must be developed. Intellectual capital is defined as the knowledge of democratic principles and practices and cognitive capacity to apply it to public affairs. The curriculum of schools can be an effective means to development of intellectual capital necessary for constructive civic engagement. Well-designed and delivered courses in civics, government, and U.S. history -- based on key ideas, information, and issues of U.S. democracy of the past and present -- enable students to acquire a fund of civic/political knowledge that can be called upon to comprehend, cope, and otherwise interact successfully with the issues, problems, and challenges of civil society and government. The curriculum must be anchored in core subjects such as history, geography, civics/government, and economics. Intellectual capital must be combined with social capital in effective education for engagement in political and civic life. The development of social capital can be achieved through experiential learning such as cooperative learning or service learning. Learning experiences that involve cooperation and community service provide opportunities for students to practice skills and behavior that become habits of responsible citizenship. The Digest concludes with a list of eight intellectual and social capital resource organizations for teachers. (JEH)

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EDD00036=Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.

Published: 1998-09

EDO-SO-98-8

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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2805 EAST TENTH STREET • SUITE 120
INDIANA UNIVERSITY
BLOOMINGTON, INDIANA 47408
812-855-3838 • 800-266-3815

EDO-SO-98-8

September 1998

Education for Engagement in Civil Society and Government

by John J. Patrick

Engagement of citizens with the institutions and operations of their communities and government is a central characteristic of a strong democracy. A recent report of The National Commission on Civic Renewal (1998, 6), however, has sounded alarms about the declining quantity and quality of citizen engagement in America's political and civic life and warns, "In a time that cries out for civic action, we are in danger of becoming a nation of spectators." Several recent reports and studies concur about declining participation by Americans in their civil society and government (American Civic Forum 1994; Bahmueller 1997; Putnam 1995).

A great strength of democratic government in the United States has been its interactions with civil society, which "refers to voluntary social activity not compelled by the state" (Bahmueller 1997, 26). Through voluntary participation in freely formed civil society associations (sometimes called non-governmental organizations or NGOs), citizens pursue personal interests that may serve the public good. Through this civic engagement, they develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and habits that make democracy work (Patrick 1996; Putnam 1995). Further, the many voluntarily formed associations of civil society are an ever-present countervailing force against abuses of power in the government.

A reliable indicator of the health of democracy in America is the vitality of civil society. However, The National Commission on Civil Renewal reports the generally accepted conclusion that "our overall civic condition is weaker than it was — and in need of significant improvement" (1998, 23). What can be done through education in schools to renew the constructive engagement of citizens in political and civic life and thereby revitalize civil society and government in America?

Development of Intellectual Capital for the Engaged Citizen. Political and civic engagement, the constructive interactions of citizens with their civil society and government, requires intellectual capital — knowledge of democratic principles and practices and cognitive capacity to apply it to public affairs (Hirsch 1996, 17-47; Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996). The curriculum of schools can be an effective means to development of intellectual capital necessary for constructive civic engagement (Niemi and Junn 1998). Well-designed and delivered courses in civics, government, and United States history — based on key ideas, information, and issues of American democracy of the past and present — enable students to acquire a fund of civic/political knowledge that can be called upon to comprehend, cope, and otherwise interact successfully with the issues, problems, and challenges of their civil society and government.

Development of intellectual capital involves the conjoining of content and processes — basic subject matter and cognitive processes and skills. To elevate one over the other — content over processes or vice versa — is a pedagogical flaw that impedes achievement of learners (Hirsch 1996). Further, some ideas, information, and issues are more worthy of emphasis than other subject matter in education for engagement in democratic civil society and government. For example, common knowledge of core principles and practices of democracy among students is a prerequisite to the development and maintenance of an active community of self-governing citizens. Without this kind of knowledge, citizens are unable to analyze public policy issues or problems, make cogent decisions about them, or act intelligently to resolve them (Center for Civic Education 1994.)

Finally, development of intellectual capital — essential knowledge and cognitive skills — is enhanced by a curriculum anchored in core subjects or academic disciplines. In the social studies field, these core disciplines are history, geography, political science (civics/government), and economics. According to John T. Bruer, a leading practitioner of cognitive science, "Expertise [development of intellectual capital] depends on highly organized, domain-specific knowledge that can arise only after extensive experience and practice in the domain [the academic discipline]. Strategies can help us process knowledge, but first we have to have the knowledge to process" (1993, 15).

Development of Social Capital for the Engaged Citizen. Intellectual capital must be combined with social capital in effective education for engagement in political and civic life. Social capital consists of participatory skills and civic virtues or character traits necessary for the constructive engagement of citizens with their civil society and government. Examples of civic virtues are civility, honesty, self-restraint, tolerance, compassion, patriotism, respect for the worth and dignity of each person, concern for the public good, and social trust.

A key element of social capital is trust among the citizens of a community. People who trust one another can cooperate to achieve common objectives. Conversely, alienated, atomized, or cynical people are likely to stay outside civil society in a marginalized domain of inefficacy. Political scientist Robert Putnam explains, "By analogy with notions of physical capital and human capital — tools and training that enhance individual productivity — social capital refers to features of social organizations such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (1995, 67).

Development of social capital can be achieved through experiential learning in concert with academic, cognitive-based learning activities. For example, civic virtues and participatory skills can be developed through methods of cooperative learning and service learning. Cooperative learning experiences involve

John J. Patrick is Director of the ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, Director of the Social Studies Development Center, and Professor of Education at Indiana University.

students working together in small groups to achieve common goals. And service learning involves students participating together in projects that serve the public good in the school or the community outside the school.

Learning experiences that involve cooperation and community service provide opportunities for students to practice skills and behavior that in time become habits of responsible citizenship. Development of these elements of social capital for the engaged citizen is likely to be enhanced when cooperative and service learning experiences are connected systematically to the development of intellectual capital through lessons about academic subject matter. For example, principles of democracy that students learn through formal academic activities in the classroom should deliberately be applied to service learning experiences in the community outside the school. And students should be required to reflect upon the connections of core academic concepts and service learning experiences (Youniss and Yates 1997, 135-153).

Resources for Civic Educators. The following organizations provide resources for civic educators interested in developing intellectual and social capital for constructive engagement of citizens in democratic civil society and government.

Center for Civic Education. 5146 Douglas Fir Road, Calabasas, CA 91302. Telephone: (818) 591-9321; FAX: (818) 591-9330; E-Mail: center4civ@aol.com; World Wide Web: <http://www.civiced.org>.

Center for Democracy and Citizenship. 130 Humphrey Center, 301 19th Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55455; Telephone: (612) 625-0142; FAX: (612) 625-3513; E-Mail: eeschenbacher@hhh.umn.edu; World Wide Web: <http://www.hhh.umn.edu/centers/cdc>.

Center for Political Leadership and Participation. University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742; Telephone: (301) 405-5751; FAX: (301) 405-6402; E-Mail: cplp@umail.umd.edu.

Communitarian Network. 2130 H Street, N.W., Suite 714, Washington, DC 20052; Telephone: (800) 245-7460; FAX: (202) 994-1606; E-Mail: comnet@qwu.edu; World Wide Web: <http://www.gwu.edu/nccps>.

Heritage Foundation. 214 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E., Washington, DC 20002; Telephone: (202) 546-4400; FAX: (202) 608-6136; E-Mail: polrev@heritage.org; World Wide Web: <http://www.policyreview.com>.

Kettering Foundation. 200 Commons Road, Dayton, OH 45459; Telephone: (937) 434-7300.

National Commission on Civic Renewal. 3111 Van Munching Hall, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742; Telephone: (301) 405-2790; FAX: (301) 314-9346; World Wide Web: <http://www.puaf.umd.edu/civicrenewal>.

Pew Partnership for Civic Change. 145-C Ednam Drive, Charlottesville, VA 22903; Telephone: (804) 971-2073; FAX: (804) 971-7042; E-Mail: mail@pew-partnership.org; World Wide Web: <http://www.pew-partnership.org>.

References and ERIC Resources. The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are (703) 440-1400 and (800) 443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number, annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of most larger libraries by using the bibliographic information provided, requested through Interlibrary Loan, or ordered from commercial reprint services.

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This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract RR93002014. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or ED.